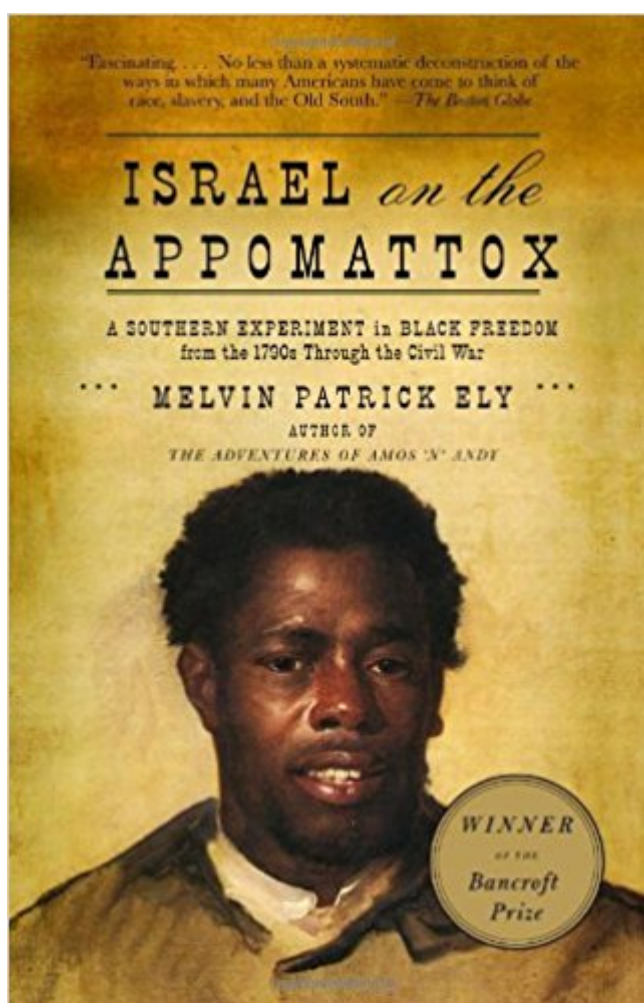


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Israel On The Appomattox: A Southern Experiment In Black Freedom From The 1790s Through The Civil War



Synopsis

WINNER OF THE BANCROFT PRIZE
A New York Times Book Review and Atlantic Monthly Editors' Choice
Thomas Jefferson denied that whites and freed blacks could live together in harmony. His cousin, Richard Randolph, not only disagreed, but made it possible for ninety African Americans to prove Jefferson wrong. *Israel on the Appomattox* tells the story of these liberated blacks and the community they formed, called Israel Hill, in Prince Edward County, Virginia. There, ex-slaves established farms, navigated the Appomattox River, and became entrepreneurs. Free blacks and whites did business with one another, sued each other, worked side by side for equal wages, joined forces to found a Baptist congregation, moved west together, and occasionally settled down as man and wife. Slavery cast its grim shadow, even over the lives of the free, yet on Israel Hill we discover a moving story of hardship and hope that defies our expectations of the Old South.

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Customer Reviews

In 1796, a few months after writing his will manumitting his 90 slaves and granting them 400 acres, Richard Randolph died; this meticulously researched book is an account of the aftermath of that gesture. Ely, professor of history and black studies at William and Mary and author of *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy*, accumulates extraordinary detail about everyday life, encompassing the family histories of the former owners and the former slaves of Prince Edward County, Virginia, and the community the African-Americans built: Israel Hill. Ely scrutinizes how work was performed, marriages made, houses built, children reared, English spoken, medicine practiced, crime punished,

names acquired and the extent to which "free blacks and whites interacted, even cooperated, in almost every manner we can conceive of. Except in the political realm and the jury box." Evidence of interracial marriage and of blacks bringing and often winning lawsuits against whites are just two significant finds. But while historians will be grateful for Ely's attention to uncommon sources ("the unusually dry annals of highway maintenance") and useful minutiae (midwives charged "either \$2 or \$3 per delivery"), plowing through his cullings will be daunting for all but the most dedicated readers.

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While Thomas Jefferson lived with the contradiction of slave ownership and the ideals of liberty, his cousin Richard Randolph could not reconcile the two. When Randolph died in 1796, he freed 90 slaves, granting them land to build a settlement among whites. Near the Appomattox River, they built a community called Israel Hill, defying the skepticism about whether blacks and whites could live in harmony as equals. Princeton-trained historian Ely presents a portrait of life during the 1790s in this little-known Virginia settlement, where whites and black former slaves lived together, working as farmers and tradesmen, even founding a Baptist congregation together. Revealed through the personal and public stories of the residents of Israel Hill, Ely reveals this extraordinary settlement where racial cooperation reigned but was not untarnished by the raging conflicts of slavery and impending war. This is a well-researched and absorbing look at the history of freedmen and race relations from an angle that defies the conventional wisdom of blacks and whites at the time. Vernon Ford

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Not the easiest reading but very thorough. Presents an extremely deep and subtle description of society in middle Virginia in the 1800s right up to the outbreak of the Civil War. Many facts are examined and what we thought we knew have all been altered by the information presented. It seems that history is always more textured and varied than an understanding that is probably OK in grade school. The work really rings true when one reflects on life today and its many incongruities. Many and complex notes in the book, some even add vital information, most just verify the text giving original sources.

very good read....It help me to trace my family tree

Excellent reading

Wonderful book. I have met the author.

This book was required for our daughter's college course and we were able to get it here at about 20% less than the B&N bookstore on campus offered it to her. Good deal... just crazy how expensive books are these days. wow!

Great book.

Anyone who did not already believe that the reality of race in the South was always more than just what meets the eye, should read this book. It describes the lives and socio-cultural patterns of a small town of free blacks in the Piedmont area of Virginia during the antebellum South, and their interaction with whites as those interactions are largely determined by white attitudes, institutions, and patterns of thought and behavior. It turns out that one of Thomas Jefferson's cousins, Richard Randolph, at the age of 21, who was committed to the idea that slavery was an unmitigated evil, bequeathed nearly 400 acres of land to his nine top slaves. After a number of intra-family complications, not the least of them being that a great deal of incest went on within the Jefferson family, or that Randolph himself died at the age of 26, eventually the land did indeed end in the hands of about 90 of his slaves. Being one of the few pre-Civil War cases in which the approximately 500,000 freed blacks actually began life with a semblance of equality at the starting line, "Israel Hill" became one of the first test cases of whether a truly free independent black community could actually survive in freedom. I do not think it gives away the punch line to suggest that not only did they, and many others less well-known and less well-endowed survive, but they also thrived, well into the 20th Century. But as the Civil War approached, and the debates defending slavery intensified, this stellar but experimental example of black community success, ran against the grain of the prevailing racist ideology, and thus was turned on its head and against all the hard evidence (that this author has resurrected and presented here), "Israel Hill," was declared by politically-inspired local racists, as little more than the expected abject black failure. That is to say, they lied and reported that it had degenerated into a regular Sodom and Gomorrah, populated by whores, pimps and other assorted underclass cretins. In a richly textured and deeply layered story of how blacks and whites accommodated themselves to the realities of their local circumstances -- even when those circumstances were highly manipulated by race-based categories and definitions,

and the legacy of one of its scions -- the author deftly uses municipal records that go back to the town's founding, to show that "Israel Hill" was not an abject failure at all but an unmitigated success. And although this narrative disproves the adage "that the arc of history always bends in the direction of justice," it nevertheless proves an even more important adage that: "left to their own devices, the realities of circumstances will indeed bend toward human accommodation," the ideology of racism be-damned. Five stars

When I picked up this book from the public library, I had never heard of Professor Ely, never heard of Israel on the Appomattox, and never heard of Richard Randolph. My sense of the social and cultural history of Virginia was informed only by a shallow and non-transactional view of what had happened there, colored by what still appears to happen there. Thus, it was not my favorite subject and I am no historian (and no scholar). OK, there are my disclaimers. That said...If I say that this book illuminated not only an era but also "a world," I am damning it with faint praise. Without hyperbole, in the most detail-oriented and genuine manner, Ely has set out a comprehensible description of a chunk of life and interlife in the prewar American South that not only came through clearly and accessibly, it came through with a vibrant quality that I believe "matches" the scene that actually played out on Israel Hill during those years. How did he do it? It was as if this entire book had been set to the exact perfect background music (would have to be the Negro Spirituals a cappella and a solo violin!) the entire time I read it. READ EVERY DOCUMENT IN THE APPENDIX; READ EVERY FOOTNOTE!! have not yet emerged from this book. Obviously, I must return it to the library and get my own copy asap. Nobody who has ever wondered how things really played out in history should miss the opportunity to let this book dissect a moment in the development of our country's bizarre past. I am sure that I missed a thousand messages in the book while discovering a hundred others. I hope I will never stop reading it for more meaning. It is a country that begs for more explorers. Five Stars.

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